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PP RUEH DU RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO
DE RUEHAN #0644/01 2680916
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 240916Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY ANTANANARIVO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1620
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1025
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000644

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/E - MBEYZEROV
PARIS FOR D'ELIA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/23/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MA](#) [XW](#)
SUBJECT: GROWING OPPOSITION FOCUSED ON CAPITAL FEUD

REF: A. 07 ANTANANARIVO 001241
[1](#)B. 08 ANTANANARIVO 00602
[1](#)C. 08 ANTANANARIVO 00629

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR NIELS MARQUARDT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Prompted by the recent involvement of increasingly higher-profile opposition leaders, President Ravalomanana and his allies have been forced to publicly confront growing discontent with the administration, if not address its causes. In the capital, a nine-month battle between the city's mayor and the national government reached temporary respite, only to be undermined the very next day with a bureaucratic ploy concerning fuel supply to the city government. On the national level, key opposition leaders (including former president Zafy) have banded together to publicly denounce the current regime, while opposition groups find their requests for demonstrations continually blocked. It is not clear that the opposition has attracted much support from the broader public, but continued concerns over cost of living increases or politically insensitive maneuvering from the government may well help their cause.
END SUMMARY.

PRESIDENT VS. MAYOR, ACT SEVEN

[1](#)2. (SBU) Over the nine months since Andry "TGV" Rajoelina was elected Mayor of Antananarivo (ref A), President Ravalomanana has made little effort to conceal his disdain for his dynamic, popular, and business-oriented young rival. Speaking privately as their public feud boiled over during the week of September 8, TGV's political advisor and former campaign manager Nirhy-Lanto Andriamahazo asserted that a well-orchestrated transfer of power from Mayor to Presidency had unfolded in five distinct acts, starting with the right to appoint administrative district (fokontany) chiefs earlier this year. That was followed by an administrative reclassification of the City of Antananarivo that deprived it of all financial independence, an assault on authority over key sporting and transportation infrastructure, and the unearthing of previous administrations' mysterious "unpaid debts".

[1](#)3. (SBU) In early September, the newly-appointed Minister of Water made a move for the city's sanitation service, SAMVA, which proved to be one step too far. Respected former PM Norbert Lala Ratsirahonana stepped in to broker a compromise, made public on September 12, in which SAMVA and the city's

eastern bus terminal were restored to the city administration. Widely seen as a victory for the Mayor, it was short-lived: the following day, the Mayor's office announced that their fuel contract had been terminated, with the new one requiring cash payment for all municipal fuel purchases. After outcry and allegations of interference from the (national) Ministry of Energy and Mining, the original contract was restored later in the week. The latest act, still unfolding, features the Ministry of Development expropriating land around Antananarivo for as yet undetermined projects, without waiting for the requisite permission from city authorities, and without the consent of the residents and subsistence rice farmers that stand to lose most.

14. (SBU) The Mayor's small victories over the last week are eclipsed by his loss of financial control and the power to appoint district chiefs, and the GOM shows little sign of ceding on these crucial issues. According to Andriamahazo, Ravalomanana's campaign against the mayor reflects concern about Andry TGV's growing popularity in a capital city political landscape ever more devoid of plausible opponents; most of the old guard no longer holds power, and has been left to scheme out of the limelight.

THE "REAL" OPPOSITION GOES PUBLIC

15. (SBU) For all of his trouble, Andry TGV has yet to actually declare himself in "opposition" to Ravalomanana's government or party (TIM), preferring instead to remain safely in the "center", along with non-aligned parties such as Ratsirahonana's AVI. The overt opposition, with such backers as former president Zafy, has found its voice in

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these last few weeks through two groups carefully named to imply neutrality in the current feud: the "Committee of Wisemen" based in Antananarivo, and Ray Aman-dreny (roughly, "elders"), recently formed in five of the six former provinces outside Antananarivo. Both have stepped up their rhetoric of late, with the Committee of Wisemen calling on the government to respect the people's democratic choice ("let the Mayor do his job"), and Ray Aman-dreny openly denouncing the government's alleged abuses and calling for change.

16. (SBU) "Centrist" contacts dismiss both groups as simply marginalized politicians seeking a route back into power, but they clearly have the President's attention, and they have attracted media attention. Opposition rallies have continually been denied permission in several major cities, and recent arrests of opposition leaders indicate that the GOM takes this more seriously than they would like to admit. The opposition appears to have retreated somewhat this week "to strategize", since their requests for public demonstrations have led nowhere.

COMMENT

17. (C) While there have not yet been any major public displays of support for the opposition or its leaders, there are a number of factors with the potential to boil over. With the Mayor locked in a struggle against the President, and the recently organized opposition becoming more unified and vocal, it may be only a matter of time before increasing food prices, inflation, or squabbles over infrastructure begin to implicate feuding politicians in ordinary peoples' problems. A protest of last week's land expropriation attracted only 200 angry villagers, but it was a real issue affecting daily life that set the government against an already marginalized group of displeased citizens.

18. (C) Per sources in the opposition and the media, the President does himself no favors with his allegedly "dictatorial" style and disdain for consultation; what may have been a strength in consolidating power and pushing through key development initiatives is increasingly serving as the common theme in a diverse and disorganized opposition. While Andry TGV was initially seen as a protest vote against rising cost of living and infrastructure problems in the capital (reftel A), his ongoing feud with the national government has increased his stock among those seeking change - even if they don't agree on what exactly that change should be. While he has yet to ally himself with an opposition party, or even publicly admit to opposing TIM, he is seen by some as the only electable opposition to Ravalomanana. Per Andriamahazo, of the Mayor's office, Ravalomanana's biggest mistake was eliminating all of his credible opposition, leaving the field open last year to an outsider opponent whose biography has much in common with his own. Although he remains too young to participate in the next presidential elections (in 2011), we can expect him to continue providing focus and substance to an otherwise divided opposition.

MARQUARDT